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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the effects of humor on the performance of college freshmen on the Nelson Denny Reading Post Test. The subjects, 36 college freshmen from two developmental reading improvement classes, were randomly assigned to experimental A or B or control sample groups. Students had previously taken forms F and C of the test as pretests while forms E and D were used as the posttest. Experimental group A was given an article of humorous nature entitled "Turds" to read prior to taking the posttest, while experimental group B was given an article of a general nature entitled "Sinkholes." The control group received no article for prereading prior to the administration of the posttest. Each student in both experimental samples was given approximately ten minutes to read the articles provided. The Nelson-Denny Reading Tests were distributed immediately afterward. Results indicated that the students reading a humorous article did significantly better on the tests than the control group, but that group A scored higher than group B. It can thus be concluded that by having students read material of any sort prior to engaging in a standardized reading test, performance can be improved. (An appendix includes sample articles given to students.) (DF)

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DOES HUMOR HAVE AN EFFECT ON THE PERFORMANCE OF COLLEGE FRESHMEN IN IMPROVING SCORES ON THE NELSON DENNY READING POST TEST?

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

Master of Arts Degree in Reading Specialization

Kean College of New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of humor on the performance of college freshmen in improving scores of the Nelson Denny Reading Post Test. Thirty-six college freshmen in two developmental reading classes were included in this study. The Nelson-Denny Reading Tests, Forms C, D, E & F served as the pre and post test. The materials used were "Turds" by Steve Martin, and "Sinkholes", an article from the New York Times, 1967. The Experimental Sample 1 received an informative article ten minutes prior to engaging in the Nelson-Denny post test. Experimental Sample 2 received an article of a humorous nature ten minutes prior to the Nelson-Denny post test, Forms E & F. The data demonstrated that scores on standardized tests can be improved significantly when subjects are read, not only a humorous but an informational passage, prior to testing. The results did not support the hypothesis that the achievements of students reading a humorous article before engaging in a Post Test will not show improvement and was rejected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to Dr. Albert Mazurkiewicz and Dr. Maryann Alexander for their invaluable assistance in making this research possible. Thanks also to my mother for all the time she spent typing and to the students who participated in my study.

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Much emphasis is placed on testing in today's society. Students cannot attend college unless they pass or achieve a certain grade on a standardized test to measure their achievement. The SAT or ACT are two tests that are used for this purpose. However, the emphasis and importance placed on these tests and the idea to score well are driven into the minds of students thus causing anxiety levels to rise and interfere with their performance.

If scores on these tests indicate a lag in areas of comprehension or another general area, they are forced to take another test before attending college. Lois Muehl (1982) stated that reading ability and the skills that accompany it are seen as "sags" in college entrance test results. In many colleges or universities, freshman students who fall into this category must engage in another test and if scores are below a certain level, they are placed in a Basic Skills or rhetoric course receiving no credit towards graduation. There are a few measures used across the country to evaluate reading efficiency. The Diagnostic Reading Tests (DRT), Reading for Understanding (RFU) and the Nelson Denny Reading Test (NDRT) are among them. For the purpose of this study, NDRT will be the primary concern. These tests are also emphasized by teachers as important and the alternative of not having to take a basic course if a certain score is achieved is given to students. Again, the anxiety level of the student is raised by this information, and performance may be affected.

Wark and Bennett (1981) have reported reliable evidence of a

negative relationship between test anxiety and reading comprehension in highly anxious students. They suggest allowing time for the student to relax to develop confidence along with receiving encouragement and support to release some of this anxiety. Smith, Ascough, et.al. (1971) suggest that humor may have an effect on task performance. The nature of the task, level of anxiety and the characteristics of the situation are contributing factors to the degree of the effect.

Clyde G. Colwell (1981) suggests using humor as a learning strategy. He states that test anxiety can be dispelled from students if a humorous item is presented. Two studies were completed by Avner Ziv (1983) investigating the influence of a humorous atmosphere on students' creativity. Although creativity is not in direct relation with testing, he found that humor affects divergent thinking which may extend a student's mind away from testing material while lowering anxiety levels.

Townsend and Mahoney (1981) did not find support in their assumption that humor is a positive factor in reducing high anxiety associated with academic evaluations. Their results stand in direct contrast with findings of Smith, et.al. (1971). However, the study did indicate that there are complex relationships between academic performance, humor and anxiety.

Reading is a very broad but important area needed to survive if one is to become what he is setting out to be. Most students who decide to attend college fall into this category. The test results

of standardized tests, such as the Nelson Denny Reading Test, are of value in providing information for evaluating efficiency in reading ability. In order to receive a degree, one must have an average or high level of reading skills. It is most important as a college freshman to score well on such tests but anxiety of performing well may interfere with the scores obtained. If the function of humor, as cited by Smith et.al.(1971), is to reduce tension and anxiety, then it might be possible to improve test performance by introducing some form of humor shortly before the anxiety provoking situation.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Does reading a humorous article prior to testing have an effect on the performance of college freshmen in improving scores on the Nelson Denny Reading Test?

HYPOTHESIS

There will not be a significant improvement in the Nelson Denny Post Test scores of college freshmen who engage in reading a humorous article before completing the Test when compared with the achievement of two other samples, one of which reads a non-humorous article before completing the test, and the other simply completing the test with no prior reading.

DEFINITIONS

Anxiety - A state of being uneasy or worried about what may happen.

Humor - The ability to appreciate or express what is funny, amusing or ludicrous.

Nelson Denny Reading Post Test - A second (different from) measure of reading abilities, reading comprehension and reading rates to provide information for evaluating competency; given fifteen weeks of instruction.

ASSUMPTIONS

It is assumed that all students possess some degree of anxiety before or during an examination. It is assumed that the humorous material presented will have universal appeal.

LIMITATIONS

The sample will be limited to thirty-six college freshmen who achieved between a 7.0 and 12.0 grade equivalent at the time of pre-testing on the N.D.R.T. Form F.

DELIMITATIONS

The study concerns itself with humor as the performance factor. It does not take into account the skills developed or learned over the course of a semester.

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURES

Thirty-six college freshmen at an urban State college in New Jersey are included in this study. The students were from two Developmental Reading Improvement classes. The classes were made up of twenty males and sixteen females of varying cultures. The students were randomly assigned to the Experimental A or B or Control Samples for this study. According to the Nelson Denny Reading Test Forms F & C, given sometime between May and September 1984, the students ranged in reading comprehension ability from the

seventh grade to the twelfth grade level.

The Nelson Denny Reading Tests, Forms F & C were used as the pre-test while Forms E & D were used as the post-test for both classes. The students were tested on vocabulary and comprehension. The format of the test was in the students' experiential background while the vocabulary may not have been a part of their experiential background.

Prior to the Post Test, all students were instructed by the same professor on various reading skills. Basic factors which develop effective reading of sentences, paragraphs and longer selections were focused on for approximately fifteen weeks. Practice exercise tests were provided to guage progress. Breaking the Barrier 2nd Edition by Gilbert and Forte and the McGinley Series, An Adult Reading Writing Vocabulary Phoneme/Grapheme Experiences from the Grid System, Part 2 were used as practice materials in both classes.

In each class, the students were randomly selected to be a part of one of three groups. The first one-third selected in each class, called Experimental A, were given an article of humorous nature entitled "Turds". The second one-third in each class, called Experimental B, were given an article of a general nature entitled "Sinkholes". The remaining one-third were used as the Control group, receiving no article for pre-reading prior to the administration of the post-test. Each student in both Experimental Samples were given approximately ten minutes to read the articles

provided. Immediately following, the Nelson-Denny Reading Tests Form F was distributed. Five students received form D of this test because they had previously taken Form F. Directions were given according to the Test manual, followed by all students engaging in a timed test. Instruction for all samples were the same throughout the fifteen weeks of class. The Experimental Samples were given articles to read prior to testing while the Control Sample was not. The results of the pre and post-tests of the Comprehension Part II Nelson-Denny Reading Test given to all three groups were compared at the end of the testing period.

The two articles used for this study were analyzed using the Flesch, Fry and Raygor Readability Formulas. This was done to insure an identical or similar readability level for both articles so that both Experimental groups would encounter the same level of difficulty. Also, a level of readability appropriate for the students' reading ability, determined from the pre-test scores of the Nelson Denny, needed to be found.

RESULTS

The readability of both articles used were shown in Table I to be adequate for use in this study.

TABLE I

READABILITY LEVELS OF ARTICLES

Readability Test	"Turds" grade level	"Sinkholes" grade level
Fry	7	7
Reygor	7	7
Flesch	8	7
Mean =	7	7

Both articles had a mean readability level of grade seven insuring an equal readability level for both Experimental groups. Considering the mean pre-test scores of all students engaged in this study, grade level seven was appropriate for their reading ability.

All three groups are shown in Table II to be equally divided with twelve students in each group. Statistical analysis was done on the pre-test data for the Control, Experimental A (humorous article) and Experimental B (general article) groups. The results of the three pre-test samples are shown in Table I.

TABLE II
(N=36)

PRETEST OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLES A & B AND CONTROL SAMPLE

Pretest	Mean	SD	t
Control	10.72	1.09	1.25 (N.S.)
Experimental A	10.70	1.14	
Experimental B	10.21	1.32	

As can be seen in Table II, there seemed to be no significant difference between the three samples in this analysis. The use of a t test indicated that there was no significant difference between the means of the Control Sample and Experimental Sample B, the samples where the greatest difference between the means is seen.

Table III shows the Post-test results of the three samples and compares the Control Sample with Experimental Sample A, the Control Sample with Experimental Sample B and Experimental Sample B with Experimental Sample A.

TABLE III

POST TEST OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLES A & B AND CONTROL SAMPLE

Post Test	Mean	SD	t
Control	12.58	2.06	3.37 (S <.01)
Experimental A	13.96	1.60	
Control	12.58	2.06	1.63 (N.S.)
Experimental B	13.25	1.23	
Experimental B	13.25	1.23	1.74 (N.S.)
Experimental A	13.96	1.60	

As indicated in Table III, there was a significant difference between the means below the .01 level between the Control and Experimental A Samples, suggesting that the experimental treatment, humorous reading, had a considerable effect on the achievement of this sample. There was no significant difference between the means of the Control and Experimental Sample B or between the two Experimental Samples.

CONCLUSIONS

It was found that by giving students humorous reading material immediately prior to test-taking, they were able to improve their scores. Experimental Sample B showed a significant mean gain over the Control Sample; however, Experimental Sample A showed a more significant mean gain over the control sample than did Experimental Sample B. Therefore, it can be concluded that by having students read for a short while material of any sort, but preferably of a humorous nature, prior to engaging in a standardized reading test, performance on such tests can be improved.

This study supports research which suggests that students can release test-anxiety to improve test scores by engaging in some type of humor prior to the anxiety-provoking stimulus, namely, a test. The data of this study demonstrated that the performance of college freshmen students when taking a test can be significantly improved through the use of pre-reading of humorous material. It would appear to be advantageous to students, especially at the secondary and college levels to engage in such practices to improve performance. A practical implication for a teacher is to allow time for students reading for a short time to engage in any reading material available prior to a test.

RELATED RESEARCH

TEST-ANXIETY

The fundamental purpose of reading improvement courses at Kean College of New Jersey is to develop proficiency in reading with a specific emphasis on vocabulary development and comprehension skills. Reading plays such a significant role in both academic and professional success that it is important to know how well one can read so it can aid in making decisions about education and vocational planning (Brown, 1973). The underachieving student needs to participate in a regular course of study but is inhibited because of readability. These courses help prepare for this course of study.

Wilson and Einbecker (1974) tested the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between reading ability and academic performance of college freshmen. Eight hundred and ninety-eight students from four Florida Junior Colleges were investigated to determine the statistical relationship between the college grade point average and reading index of college freshmen. The findings of the study indicated a positive and significant correlation between reading ability and academic performance of the junior college freshmen. However, although many college reading programs assume that the utility of skills gained in a reading course is transfered and applied in other courses, definitive evidence is lacking at the four institutions included in this study.

The Nelson Denny is the indicator of reading ability of entering freshmen at Kean College and according to Robert Forsythe

(1978), the test is intended to serve predictive screening and broadly diagnostic purposes for the students who engage in it. The contents of the test appear to be directed at college students. It shows some validity for identifying people, at the college level, who need remedial work. The major use emphasized by authors and publishers, as cited by Forsythe, is the diagnostic use in identifying areas of strength and weakness as well as providing implications.

Alton Raygor (1978) concerns himself with the NDRT and its level of difficulty. He feels that the use of this test on anyone other than highly selected college students will produce very questionable measurement results. It will provide to many students a difficult, defeating and frustrating experience.

Peter H. Wood (1982) attempted to determine the difficulty level and usefulness of Form C of the NDRT as a predictor of freshmen grades at a midwestern university. A sample of two thousand one hundred and twenty-two entering freshmen were given both sections of the test and scores from the test, ACT and SAT scores, high school GPA and various college grades over a three semester period were analyzed. The overall internal consistency estimate of the NDRT appeared adequate for predictive purposes but probably not adequate for diagnostic purposes, involving vocabulary and comprehension score differences.

In this study, the purpose of the NDRT is to diagnosis and

predict the reading ability of entering freshmen. Based on the evidence and research presented, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test is useful in selecting those entering or enrolled college students who are in need of remedial work. Scores obtained can be an aid in determining the area of difficulty a student is encountering and in which area further testing should be directed.

Gifford and Fluitt (1980) commented on standardized tests and ways in which school officials can make the test results a true indicator of student achievement and curricular effectiveness. They suggest various ideas of how to overcome anxiety and wise-up to standardized testing. Directions, speed, clear thinking, and familiarity of the test and center or room are included in their list. Students should become test-wise with all aspects of testing. To suggest such ideas leads one to believe there must be a good reason or reasons why one should become test-wise. Assuming that anxiety is an interfering barrier confronting many students at the time of testing, one could suggest that this is a good reason to become test-wise. Scores on standardized tests are usually important determinants in education, and since it has been reported that anxiety and stress can interfere with performance (Smith et al., 1971), why not become test-wise.

Jerry L. Deffenbacher (1978) from Colorado State University investigated sources of interference in highly test anxious subjects performing under stress. Three groups were studied solving anagrams

under high and low stress conditions. The results gave supportive evidence for test-wise reasoning. The high-anxiety, high-stress group reported

more anxiety during testing, rated the situation more negatively, solved fewer anagrams, estimated spending less time in task, experienced more interference and reported greater distraction of attention to emotionability, worry and task-generated interference than did either the high-anxiety-low-stress group. Performance suffered as less time was spend on the task itself. When worry (or cognitive concern about performance and consequence of failure) and emotionality (physiological arousal or upset) are present in a situation, task performance becomes misdirected and competes with task-generated interference.

Hollandsworth, Glazeski, Kirkland, Jones and Van Norman (1979) conducted a study investigating the nature and effects of test anxiety in terms of behaviorial, cognitive and physiological responses in an academic testing situation. The sample was limited to three high test-anxious and three low test-anxious females. Results indicated that low-anxious subjects for whom test anxiety was aroused during testing found it facilitative while high test-anxious subjects labeled their arousal as debilitative. Hollandsworth et al, (1979) suggested high test-anxious students should be taught to re-label test anxiety arousal as facilitative and use it to increase and maintain on-task responses.

Roberta and Norman Milgram (1977) group-administered an intelligence measure presumably free of anxiety provoking cues. The Tel-Aviv Humor Comprehension Test, based on the work of Zigler, Levine and Gould, was administered to one hundred and seventy-seven children in grades four to six with a wide intelligence range from well below average to above average. The investigation to find the effect of test content and context on the anxiety-intelligence relationship proved to have a negative relationship. However, the children did report high ratings of funniness and exhibited glee in their test-taking behavior.

From the literature reviewed, one can gather the possibility of eliminating test performance interference by supplying an anxiety free provoking test. However, in reference to standardized tests, such as the Nelson-Denny, this is not obtainable. Another possibility, as suggested by Townsend, Mahoney and Allen (1983), is to provide humor in the testing situation. Humor, as cited by Freud in Townsends et.al. (1983) is a relaxing mechanism in times of stress. It can also served to increase attention and interest in a topic. Educators who are concerned with increasing student interest in a topic often use humor as a motivating technique. Educators concerned with reduction of student stress may be inclined to consider the use of humor in the testing process.

The study by Townsend, et al, (1983) was designed to investigate student perceptions of the role of humor in test

situations. Verbal and cartoon humor was inserted into an achievement test and was presented to one hundred and thirty-two students, along with a humor questionaire. The items were thought to be humorous and not detrimental to attention or achievement. However, the students were undecided about the general use of humor in tests or whether the humor helped to relax them.

John Hedl (1978) evaluated the effects of humor in reducing state anxiety. Fifty-two high and low-anxious undergraduate students rated testing and non-testing cartoons for funniness. The results support the optimal arousal model of humor appreciation. Hedl stated the complexity of humor effectiveness in testing situations. He feels although humor may serve to enhance performance of test-anxious students, it may in turn depress the actual test performance of low-test anxious students. In exercising the use of humor in academic testing situations, he gives caution.

Jerry Deffenbacher, along with Shiela Deitz and Susan Hazaleus (1981), conducted another study investigating performance, worry and emotionality, but this time adding humor and test anxiety and the effect it has on the student. He sought to find if humor would lower state test anxiety and improve performance. He based his assumption that humorous exams improve performance for high-anxious students on the work of Smith, et al (1971). Four exams of two types, humorous and regular, were given in two classes.

The exams were rated for humorousnesss followed by the completion of

the Worry-Emotionality Scale. The humorous exam was rated higher. Subjects taking it reported less worry, but the subjects scored significantly lower than those taking the regular exam. These results failed to replicate and suppoort the findings of Smith, et al (1971). Manipulated humor did not decrease state anxiety or improve performance; it was only perceived as humorous. General intelligence and problem-solving skills are two factors that may influence performance and should be assessed when studying such relationships.

Research by McMorris (1983) indicates that humor did not affect grammar scores on matched humorous/non-humorous items of a fifty item multiple choice test. Students favored humor inclusion, judged it positively and found the items easier. He sees need for more valid and humane measurement on such a topic.

In a similar study by Brown and Itzig (1976), humorous questions on a test did not help high-anxious subjects but appeared to hinder performance. However, low-anxious subjects performed better with the humorous test and all subjects reported relief from anxiety levels through humorous questions. They suggest avoiding humorous test questions because of the risk of biasing the testing situation against high anxiety or arousal level students.

Based on the findings of the above research, humor can be utilized as a positive or negative source in test performance, but test-anxiety proneness of students and momentary state of anxiety

are effects that play a role in the utilization. (Hedl, 1978).

Testing has become a major component in making evaluative decisions. Efforts should be made to create positve rather than negative reactions to testing among test takers. (McMorris, 1983).

It is evident from research that the testing situation does create high anxiety levels and worry in students. It has also been found by Townsend (1983) that humor can serve as a stress and tension relaxer which is related to anxiety. By modeling the study of Smith, et al (1971), and collaborating the research and conclusions of various studies, one can investigate the effects of performance of high and low anxious students when presenting humor in a testing situation.

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APPENDIX

EXPERIMENTAL [illegible] - HUMOROUS

TURDS

The Turds never became accepted in this country because of their name. The Turds, or people from Turdsmania, were people of healthy stock. They were tall, with long straight hair; the men robust, the women bold and beautiful. The first Turds arrived on these shores in fifteen eighty-nine, one year after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. They were unjustly blamed for the defeat of the Spanish Fleet when a Spanish admiral remarked, "No wonder we lost, we had a bunch of turds managing our cannons!"

When finally in America, they also had trouble with lodgings. Most boarding houses had a sign on the front, "No Turds." The Turdsmen naturally interpreted it to mean, "No people from Turdsmania, please." They consequently felt rejected, as would any Turd.

Even those who decided to return to Turdsmania had a rough time going back. Once on the boat, they would ask, "Where do the Turds stay?" And a mate would innocently reply, "Why, in the can, sir," thinking it was some kind of Navy test. The Turdsmen would spend the rest of the voyage huddled in the men's room. Once back in the homeland, however, their lot became a happier one. Each man and woman could pass each other on the street and proudly say, "I'm a Turd!"

Reading plays such a significant role in both academic and professional success that it merits your special attention and consideration. The knowledge of how well you read can help you make important decisions about your education, as well as aid you in your vocational planning. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test is a measure of your reading ability and provides information for evaluating your efficiency.

The test gives a three-dimensional picture of your reading abilities by measuring your vocabulary development, your reading comprehension, and your reading rate. From your test scores you can easily evaluate the overall quality of your reading. That assessment will help you to intelligently reinforce your reading strengths and correct your reading weaknesses. As you become a more proficient reader, your academic achievement is likely to improve, and the enjoyment you get from the act of reading is sure to grow.

EXPERIMENTAL B - GENERAL NATURE

SINKHOLES

YOU ARE DRIVING ALONG AND
THE CAR IN FRONT OF YOU
SUDDENLY SINKS INTO THE EARTH,
OUT OF SIGHT.

LAKELAND, Fla., April 29 - Two cars dropped from sight, plunging to the bottom of a 30-foot sinkhole that turned up so suddenly the drivers could not avoid it.

No one was hurt, but the incident was the fifteenth of its kind reported in this area so far this year.

At a town 13 miles from Lakeland, two bedrooms of one house dropped into a hole 60 feet across and 35 feet deep. Part of the next house hung dangerously over the hole. The people in both houses had to be taken to safety.

Sinkholes have been happening without warning in this part of Florida for years. So far there is no way to predict when or where one will turn up. But when one does, others usually follow in the same area, usually along a straight line.

The worst sinkhole in recent years appeared in 1965. It was 70 feet across and 150 feet deep. It destroyed one house, damaged several others, and cracked walls a city block away.

One hole, 15 feet deep, opened up this year in the middle of U.S. Highway 19 seconds after a car had driven by. Others in

the same area occurred at night, damaging houses, swallowing up lawns, trees and parts of streets and causing 23 frightened residents to run away from their homes in nightclothes.

Sinkholes happen when the weather is very dry. The earth at the surface begins to drop into these cavities, like sand falling into a giant hourglass. A sinkhole results.

--NEW YORK TIMES